

THE ADVENT OF JAZZ

THE DAWN OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Jazz grew out of the African-American community at the turn of the 20th century, a time when blacks were being denied their most basic rights. The music has since become a part of every American's birthright, a timeless symbol of American individualism and ingenuity, American democracy and inclusiveness.



New Orleans port scene, c. 1800.
Courtesy of the Williams Research Center,
Historic New Orleans Collection.

NEW ORLEANS: MELTING POT OF SOUND

The birthplace of jazz is New Orleans, the most cosmopolitan city in the South. It was a French and then a Spanish port before Americans took it over as part of the [Louisiana Purchase](#) in 1803. And long before the Civil War, it was famous for its two symphony orchestras, its [opera house](#) with a special gallery set aside for slaves, its love of dancing, and its annual celebration of [Mardi Gras](#). People from everywhere came and went at its wharves, bringing with them their own styles of music: from Midwestern ragtime and parading [funeral bands](#) to [African](#), [Latin](#), and Caribbean rhythms; from Mississippi blues, European [classical piano](#), and [opera](#) to the gospel of the Baptist Holiness Church—all the ingredients of jazz met and mixed in the streets of New Orleans.

The music has since become a part of every American's birthright, a timeless symbol of American individualism and ingenuity, American democracy and inclusiveness.

African-American residents added an emphasis on dance and percussion: Rhythms and styles that had originated in Africa were reborn in Congo Square, a grassy plain in the northwestern corner of the city where slaves were permitted to dance and sing on Sundays. African Americans also brought with them Latin and Caribbean rhythms nurtured in the West Indies, which had served as the way station to North America for many of their ancestors. From the first, they absorbed all they could of the music around them—opera, church hymns, even [military music](#), which was all the rage after the Civil War and was blasted through the city's muddy streets by brass bands, both black and white.





Unknown Creole musician.
Courtesy of the Louisiana State Museum.

“Creoles of color”—a term that generally referred to the light-skinned descendants of white slave masters and their black mistresses—added other elements to the musical blend. They enjoyed a special, separate status in New Orleans, somewhere between the white and black worlds. Creole musicians prided themselves on their formal training and often looked down on less well-schooled blacks, whom they called “fakers” and “ear-men” because many could not read music.

During [Reconstruction](#), Creoles wielded considerable political influence in the city. But after the last federal troops were withdrawn from the former Confederacy in 1877 and white rule was re-imposed in Louisiana, they saw their power—and the social position that went with it—steadily decline.

THE RISE OF JIM CROW

In 1890, a Louisiana state law required black and white railroad passengers traveling through the state to occupy separate cars. In hopes of overturning this and other segregation laws in court, a New Orleans Creole named Homer Adolph Plessy got himself arrested for refusing to leave a “white” first-class car for which he'd bought a ticket. Convicted of breaking the law, he appealed to a higher court.

In 1896, the United States Supreme Court found in  [Plessy v. Ferguson](#) (Ferguson was the judge who initially ruled against Plessy in the lower court) that “separate but equal facilities” were constitutional. That decision and the system of discrimination that grew from it—a set of laws and traditions collectively known as  [Jim Crow](#)—would circumscribe the lives of black people in the American South, and in New Orleans, for nearly 60 years.




Jelly Roll Morton (in blackface) and partner
in black vaudeville.
Courtesy of the Duncan P. Schiedt Collection.


It also affected New Orleans music. Because their ancestry included what a new state law defined as “a traceable amount” of “Negro blood,” Creoles now found themselves classified with other African Americans as second-class citizens, and Creole musicians who had played for wealthy whites were suddenly displaced by white musicians and forced to compete for work with the less well-trained black musicians they had once scorned.

EVERYTHING ALL AT ONCE

Meanwhile, during the same decade that saw Jim Crow’s grip steadily tighten on New Orleans, African Americans added three fresh strains to the city’s already rich musical mix: ragtime, blues, and the sacred music of the Baptist Holiness church.


 [Ragtime](#) was first heard in black neighborhoods in Midwestern cities. It was the outgrowth of the African-American tradition of “ragging”—syncopating and rearranging every kind of music to create livelier, more danceable versions. Older people deplored ragtime; one critic called it “syncopation gone mad ... an infectious disease.” But young people loved it, and it remained America’s most popular music for a quarter of a century. No city heard more of it than New Orleans.

Older people deplored ragtime; one critic called it “syncopation gone mad ... an infectious disease.” But young people loved it, and it remained America’s most popular music for a quarter of a century. No city heard more of it than New Orleans.

At about the same time, black refugees from the cotton fields of the Mississippi River Delta began streaming into the city in search of better-paying jobs on the waterfront. With them they brought the  [blues](#). This emerging form began as purely vocal music that followed no rigid structure. But when New Orleans musicians began to play the blues on their instruments, an agreed-upon form started to develop: three chords, most often arranged in 12-bar sequences, that somehow allowed for an infinite number of variations and expressed an infinite number of emotions.



Country church and congregation.
Courtesy of the Louisiana State Museum.

The blues was good-time music and was therefore disparaged by some church people. The music being played in  [black Holiness churches](#)—employing drums, tambourines, and trombones—was sacred. But musically it was almost identical to the blues. Each was built around the same rhythms, the same moans and cries and bent notes. Each was meant to help find hope in a troubled world. Both employed the same call-and-response structure—one blues musician answering another, just as the preacher and his congregation talked back and forth. All of this would be echoed in jazz.

Beginning some time in the late 1890s, a handful of black New Orleans musicians began to fuse all the music that surrounded them into something new. The result was “not spirituals or blues or ragtime,” one man remembered, or any of the other kinds of music heard in the Crescent City, “but everything all at once, each one putting something over on the other.”

THE FEELING OF THE MAN

No one knows for certain which musicians were the first to play the music we would now recognize as jazz, but the most likely candidate was the cornetist ★ [Buddy Bolden](#). All we really know about this elusive figure is that he was the grandson of slaves, a plasterer by trade who played with a string orchestra for dancers before he formed his own brass band and began billing himself as Professor Bolden. There is only one known photograph of him, and his music was never recorded. But he seems to have been among the first to understand that wonderful things would happen if you brought together the syncopated polyphony of the marching bands and the emotional power of the blues on one bandstand. By all accounts, Bolden delivered an enormous sound and possessed a bold inventiveness that made people turn out to see him not just because they wanted to listen to music but because they wanted to hear what Buddy Bolden, individually, was going to do with it. New Orleans dancers flocked to him. When younger Creole musicians heard him play—and saw the crowds he was drawing every evening—they realized they'd better try to play like him, too. "If I wanted to make a living," one Creole musician remembered, "I had to be rowdy" like Bolden and the other black musicians already following his lead. "So that's the way 🎵 [jazz](#) started," another Creole recalled, "just through the feeling of the man ... his improvisations."

THE WHOLE WORLD WILL SWING ALONG

Segregation may have governed even the smallest details of daily life, but it would never be able to keep real musicians from listening to, and learning from, one another, in New Orleans or anywhere else. "We had all nations in New Orleans," the Creole pianist and composer ★ [Jelly Roll Morton](#) remembered, "but with the music we could creep in close to other people." There was as yet no name for the new American music Buddy Bolden, Morton, and others had pioneered, but by 1900, in defiance of Jim Crow, scores of black and white and Creole musicians in New Orleans were getting together and eagerly trying to play it. And by around 1910, as New Orleans musicians grew weary of segregation and began moving north and west in search of freer lives and fresh audiences, they would take the new music with them.

"We had all nations in New Orleans," the Creole pianist and composer Jelly Roll Morton remembered, "but with the music we could creep in close to other people."

In 1914, the cornetist 🎵 [Freddie Keppard](#) and his six-man Original Creole Orchestra carried it all the way to Los Angeles, where they began a four-year national vaudeville tour. His band performed minstrel-style comedy onstage, but they also introduced the sounds of New Orleans to audiences all over the country. Jelly Roll Morton, too, spent much of the 1910s moving from town to town, performing jazz at the piano and showing local musicians how to join in.



The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, c. 1917.
Courtesy of the Frank Driggs Collection.

But it took the phonograph—invented in 1877 and popularized after World War I—to turn jazz into a national sensation. On March 7, 1917, a white New Orleans outfit that billed itself as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band released a recording of two New Orleans tunes, 🎵 ["Dixieland Jazz Band One-Step"](#) and 🎵 ["Livery Stable Blues"](#) (in which cornetist 🎵 [Nick LaRocca](#) made his horn whinny like a horse). Many older people thought it was little more than noise—Thomas Edison, inventor of the very technology that would eventually propel jazz into the mainstream, joked that he played jazz records backwards "because they sound better that way." But younger people loved it—it was fast, exciting, and ideal for dancing. They bought more than a million copies at 75 cents

each, a figure exceeding that of any single record, in any genre, before it. It elevated the band to superstardom and spawned scores of eager imitators.

The new music soon spread overseas. During World War I, 🎵 [Lieutenant James Reese Europe](#), leader of Harlem's all-black 369th Infantry (the "Hellfighters") Band, wowed American doughboys and French townspeople alike with his distinctive brand of orchestrated ragtime, filled with smears and bent notes and rhythmic excitement borrowed from jazz. A few weeks after the war ended, 21-year-old ★ [Sidney Bechet](#) opened in London with a troupe called the Southern Syncopated Orchestra. Each night, he improvised a clarinet solo, on a tune called "Characteristic Blues," that was so inventive and so emotionally powerful that the Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet hailed it as "the advent of an art." Bechet, Ansermet wrote, had mapped out "the highway the whole world will swing along tomorrow."

CROSSING THE COLOR LINE

Many white Americans continued to resist turning onto that highway, just as their predecessors a generation earlier had resisted ragtime. Jazz still seemed wild and raucous to them; worse, it had been invented by African Americans, from whom whites had been taught to expect nothing of value. Because jazz was a black creation, some argued, it must be “primitive,” “barbaric,” threatening to the nation’s morals. But young white dancers continued to love it, and here and there some began to hear in it something more than novelty and excitement: In the playing of these African Americans, they sensed the expression of their own feelings. Inevitably, some wanted to start making this music themselves—a daring proposition in a country that kept blacks and whites from competing on an equal basis, and in a domain dominated by blacks. And yet they found a warm welcome. Real musicians, it became clear, never recognized a color line.



Leon “Bix” Beiderbecke, c. 1921.
Courtesy of the Frank Driggs Collection.

The most influential of these white adventurers was a musically precocious boy from Davenport, Iowa, named [Leon “Bix” Beiderbecke](#). He took up the cornet at 15 after hearing a recording by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. By 18, he was playing aboard the steamboats that docked along the Mississippi riverfront. His mother and father disapproved and sent him to a military school outside Chicago in the hope that he would abandon jazz. Instead, he reveled in it, slipping out of his dormitory night after night to play for dancers or just to listen to the New Orleans musicians now in permanent residence on the South Side.

By the early 1920s, hundreds of black people from the South were arriving in Chicago every day as part of what came to be called the [Great Migration](#). (One and a half million African Americans would flee Jim Crow between 1917 and 1930.) [South State Street](#)—called the Stroll—and its side streets were soon lined with so many clubs featuring jazz that the banjoist Eddie Condon claimed that if you held a horn up in the air in this part of town it would play all by itself.

THE FATHER OF ALL TO COME

In the summer, crowds of all ages gathered at a place called the [Lincoln Gardens](#) to hear the Creole Jazz Band, which featured two New Orleans cornetists, [Joe “King” Oliver](#) and his newly arrived protégé, [Louis Armstrong](#).

He was “the heir of all that had gone before,” one fellow trumpet-player recalled, “and the father of all that was to come.” And he was about to launch a musical revolution.

Armstrong was born in 1901 in a poor New Orleans neighborhood so violent its residents called it the Battleground. His mother was a sometime prostitute; he barely knew his father. At 12, he got in trouble with the law and received his first cornet lessons while serving time in a home for delinquent boys. His genius was soon undeniable. By his mid-teens he was playing alongside adults in honkytonks and was already earning fame among musicians for the warmth of his tone and the power and inventiveness with which he played the blues. Before moving north to Chicago to join King Oliver, he spent three summers mastering his craft while playing for dancers aboard [Mississippi steamboats](#).



Louis Armstrong (left) and Joe "King" Oliver,
Chicago, c. 1923.
Courtesy of the Frank Driggs Collection.

By the time Armstrong left New Orleans, he was already a legend among musicians there. Now, he and Oliver electrified Chicago musical circles too, performing duet breaks in which the younger man seemed always to know just what his boss was going to play and was ready to provide the perfect complement to it. Would-be musicians, black and white, gathered at the Lincoln Gardens each night to see if they could figure out how it was done—and to experience the energy that flowed from the bandstand. Bud Freeman, a white suburbanite and future saxophone star, never forgot the lessons he learned there.

"In those days," he remembered, "we were brainwashed into believing that blacks were inferior to us ... to look down on any race that wasn't white. Now, here were these black people who were allowed no privileges. They were not allowed to come into our shops and cinemas, but we whites were allowed to go out to their community, where they treated us beautifully. ... It was on the strength of this that I developed a love for them and became a jazz musician."

In the spring of 1924, Louis Armstrong accepted an invitation from Fletcher Henderson, leader of the best-known black dance band in the country, to join him in New York. Seven years after the release of the world's first jazz recording, much of what passed for jazz remained syncopated but stiff and agitated, with short, staccato solos built around what one musician called a "two-beat rhythmic feel." After Armstrong got to Manhattan, all that began to change.

During his time in the Creole Jazz Band, Louis Armstrong had always been careful not to outshine King Oliver, the man who had given him his big chance, but he could not remain in Oliver's shadow for long. He was "the heir of all that had gone before," one fellow trumpet-player recalled, "and the father of all that was to come." And he was about to launch a musical revolution.